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ABSTRACT

Prompted, in part, by a concern over the surprise and disillusionment many new teachers have expressed about the problems they encounter in the classroom, an instructor of an advanced writing class (required of all English majors and minors in the teaching curriculum) distributed to his students a five-page questionnaire/survey to see how they perceived their future roles. The questionnaire and the writing it produced served as a catalyst for discussion rather than as a quantitative end in itself. Specifically, it (1) highlighted important issues the students needed to think and talk about, (2) provided subjects for discussion, (3) gave the instructor a clearer sense of where his students thought they were heading and a sense of what they saw as their future teaching strengths and weaknesses, (4) indicated for students the kinds of problems they would be facing, and (5) gave the students a sense of assurance by knowing some of the problems that would lie ahead, by sharing ideas and experiences, and by thinking about strategies to cope with problems. (HOD)

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The Anticipated Problems of Future Teachers of English

In a 1983 article titled "Lion Tamers and Baby Sitters: First-Year Teachers' Perceptionsof Their Undergraduate Preparation," (English Education 15, 17-24) Bill O'Rourke described the teaching worlds of seventeen new teachers. To those of us who have taught in the public schools, the situations and problems were all too familiar: work loads were too heavy, too many preparations were required, students needed too much disciplining, and non-school problems created too much stress.

That all sounded very familiar. What I found unfamiliar, however, was the surprise and disillusionment many of these new teachers expressed. Perhaps I had been well prepared for public school teaching because so many of my relatives were teachers, or perhaps my student teaching had been sufficiently challenging to help me sense what was ahead, but I had not been especially surprised by the difficulties I faced. However, as a teacher in an education program, I was surprised by the fact that these young teachers were surprised. They seemed distressed, even shocked, that teaching had its problems, so many problems. They seemed disappointed that their students did not like and admire them as they had--by implication--liked and admired their own teachers. They seemed troubled that their schooling had not

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prepared them completely for the work they had to do. They seemed somewhat disoriented by the apathy they found in students and experienced faculty alike. As a result, I became intrigued by their naivete--their innocence which quickly seemed to turn into something like despair.

How could they, I asked myself, have been so "starry eyed?" How could they have completed their schooling and yet remained so unaware? Had no one in their college classes addressed issues beyond lesson plans and behavioral objectives? Had the teachers addressed serious problems of the teaching profession, and yet had the students ignored the discussions, thinking that those problems only occurred in the "bad schools," schools where they would never teach? Had their student-teaching experiences been so closely monitored that they were unrepresentative? I couldn't understand how these first-year teachers could have been so sheltered, so uninformed.

Don't mistake my reaction to O'Rourke's article. I was pleased to see the problems of new teachers discussed. But at the same time I found the article unsettling. In many ways, it suggested that those of us who train teachers are not helping our students enough, are not encouraging them to think about the problems they will soon face. As a result, I decided to see how my teachers-in-training perceived their futures in the schools--in hopes of preparing them better.

To do that, I have distributed for the last three semesters a five-page questionnaire/survey on the second day of my Advanced Writing Class--a class required of all English majors and minors

in the teaching curriculum. I modeled the five-page questionnaire after O'Rourke's article, using many of first-year teachers' topics to frame the questions I asked. I made the questions easy to answer. For instance, when I asked "How much difficulty to you expect to have maintaining discipline?," I provided a ten number scale, using 1 for "no trouble" and 10 for "lots of trouble." I also provided space for addition comments or clarifications. Students completed and submitted the questionnaires without identifying marks of any kind. That, I trust, made their responses honest and their comments candid. I have so far used the questionnaires with three classes, with a total of seventy-three students, and have found the results intriguing. But more importantly, I have been better informed; I gained a better sense of what my students thought was waiting for them "out there" in the world of teaching.

For simplicity of presentation, let me include here a sampling of the questions, the tallied responses, and some comments students made:

1. How many hours do you expect to spend each night (past regular school time) to prepare for your classes?

Hours:	1	2	3	4	5
	4%	26%	48%	14%	8%

"Four hours sounds awful, but I hope I can cut this down with practice."

2. How many different class preparations do you anticipate?

Classes:	1	2	3	4	5
		20%	59%	17%	4%

"As a student, I loved electives. As a teacher, they may not be so great."

3. How much difficulty do you expect to have maintaining discipline?

No Trouble									Lots of Trouble
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	14%	24%	14%	17%	10%	7%	10%	4%	

"As an RA, restaurant manager, and 4-H leader, I've already been initiated."

"Discipline depends on a state of mind. If you feel in control, the students will sense that, and you probably will be."

4. How troubled are you by what you've heard about student violence?

Not Troubled									Worried
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
14%	20%	4%	10%	17%	10%	17%		8%	

"In Indiana??"

"I come from a pretty tough background myself."

"I would be less troubled if I knew where I'd be teaching--or maybe more worried!"

5. How important is it to you that your students like you?

Unimportant									Very Important
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4%	4%	4%		8%	4%	14%	31%	17%	14%

"I don't want to be their pal. I prefer that they respect me as a teacher."

"It would be nice, but I probably won't lose much sleep over it."

"I'm embarrassed by how important this is to me."

6. How well prepared are you to teach literature?

Poorly Prepared									Well Prepared
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
		9%	4%	17%	14%	14%	24%	14%	4%

"I have a good reading background, but I hope my methods class will help me on the <u>how</u>'s of teaching lit."

"I've been <u>taught</u> lit, but I haven't learned how <u>to teach</u> lit."

7. How well prepared are you to teach writing?

Poorly Prepared									Well Prepared
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4%	4%	10%	6%	34%	10%	20%	4%	4%	4%

"Grading papers has yet to be discussed in any of my classes."

"What I've learned has been from observing good teachers."

8. How well prepared are you to teach grammar?

Poorly Prepared									Well Prepared
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7%	14%	7%	23%	10%	10%	14%	7%	4%	4%

"Who wants to be prepared to teach grammar?"

"I understand it, but how to teach it confuses me."

"The lower the grade level, the better I feel."

9. How well prepared are you to teach media-related material?

Poorly Prepared									Well Prepared
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
10%	10%	14%	14%	6%	14%		24%	8%	

"What I know is because of my own interest."

10. How important is it for you to motivate your students?

Unimportant								Very Important	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				5%			10%	26%	59%

"It's the key to learning."

"It's a two-way street--not totally up to me."

11. How much difficulty do you expect to have adjusting to a full-time job?

Little Difficulty								Much Difficulty	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
20%	7%	24%	7%	10%	10%	4%	4%	7%	7%

"I take 18 hours each term and work 35 hours a week. Can a full-time job be much worse than that?"

"I hate to wake up early."

12. Do you anticipate problems as you shift from the loosely structured college environment to the highly structured secondary environment?

No Problems									Many Problems
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7%	7%	14%	17%	17%	14%	14%	7%		3%

"I'm not very organized, so I see some problems ahead."

"My language and clothes will require the greatest changes."

"I've worked as a teacher's aid, so I know what I'm getting into."

13. Do you anticipate any problems in working with administrators (principal, assistant principal, deans)?

No Problems									Many Problems
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
17%	14%	14%	14%	14%	10%	7%	7%	3%	

"I hope they're more helpful than I've heard."

"Defending bad policies will be tough."

"I have to get along. I need a job."

I have resisted the urge to offer generalizations based on my own students' responses to these questions. Their reactions and comments are, at least to an extent, typical of those which

might be offered by other students in the teaching curriculum. But what I find more useful than any particular analysis is the way college teachers can use a questionnaire like this one for generating discussion in their classes. Consequently, I prefer to see the questionnaire as a catalyst for discussion rather than as quantitative end in itself.

The questionnaire has served several purposes for my students and me. First, the questionnaire has highlighted important issues about which students need to think and about which we need to talk. I know the kinds of problems my teachers-in-training will soon have to face in their own schools and classrooms, as do most English education faculty, but sometimes, if O'Rourke's article presents an accurate view, many of our students don't. The questionnaire, then, concentrated my students'attention on key issues. How they faced them, to be honest, is hard to tell. But at least the issues were brought to their immediate attention.

Second, the questionnaire has continued to provide subjects for discussion. Several students always ask why this or that question was included, while others ask if these <u>really</u> are going to be problems. We talk about these subjects, and I always speak about my six years of high school teaching and my recent work teaching in the public schools. I also encourage my students to remember problems that existed in the secondary schools they attended.

Third, the questionnaire has given me a clearer sense of where my students think they're heading and a sense of what they see as their future teaching strengths and weaknesses. In the

context of our writing and reading, we address these issues, and I try to offer as much realistic guidance as I can.

Fourth, the questionnaire and the resulting writing and discussion have given my students a sense of problems they may be facing. It has been a delicate balancing act for me to keep this work realistic without being negative--to keep my students eager without being naive. Good humor helps, especially when discussing the problems, but sometimes seriousness must prevail.

Fifth, the questionnaire and its spin-offs have given my students, if I have interpreted their reactions properly, a sense of assurance. Knowing some of the problems that lie ahead, sharing ideas and experiences, and thinking about strategies to cope with problems can make them feel more secure, more aware. My English majors and minors are perceptive--and what they fear most, I think, is the unknown. Getting some sense of their future in teaching, albeit tentative and abstract, gives them an edge; at least they won't be totally surprised.

We cannot, of course, totally prepare our teachers-in-training for their later work. There's too much to learn, and much of that learning takes place when they are in their first jobs. But we can, at least, discuss serious issues with them before they begin such work. Students appreciate candid discussions, and questionnaires like this one are good ways to get students thinking and talking. Through this kind of work, our students will learn that they are not going into the idealistic and unrealistic world of Room 222, Lucas Tanner, The Greatest American Hero, or Welcome Back Kotter. With more honest

expectations and with a clearer understanding of what teaching can be like, perhaps our students will not have to face the disillusionment that so often interferes with first year teaching.

What are you anticipating most?

Starting my career
The challenge of doing a good job
Not being a student anymore
Having my own classroom
Seeing if my ideas work
Getting to the other side of the desk
Extra-curricular activities
Teaching literature
Summers off
Watching kids grow and learn
A new town
Learning from my students
Teaching writing
Getting to know my students
Planning my own courses
Putting my knowledge into practice
Group activities
Working with other professionals
A few students I can really help

What are you dreading most?

The number of students in classes
Grading papers
Grammar
Teaching seniors to read
The pay!
Teaching evaluations
Leaving the security of college life
The first day of class
Pressure to pass students
Not "getting it across"
Lack of funds for school materials
Irrate and narrow-minded parents
Teaching the same lesson four times a day
Apathetic students
Getting up early
Problem children

Little community support
Administrators
The faculty lounge and its politics
Teaching evaluations
Pressure to join a union
Lesson plans the first year
Form filling
Student violence
Being unprepared to teach well